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SIPDIS

STATE FOR G/IWI, DRL/IRF, NEA/RA AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: GENDER AND RELIGIOUS REFORM: WOMEN "IMAMS" IN
MOROCCO

REF: 06 RABAT 1042 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Morocco has successfully made gender a central component of religious reform in its efforts to both counter religious extremism and promote women's participation in all areas of civic life. Beginning with the ground-breaking 2004 reform of the Family Code (Moudawana), and extending to a greater inclusion of women at every level of politics and religion, reform has been comparatively swift and far-reaching. Among the more striking and controversial reforms are those designed to promote the role of women as Islamic theological leaders or *mourchidats*.⁸ They minister to men as well as women and some teach in prisons. Women are on the High Council of Ulema as well as the Ulema Council for Moroccans Abroad. Although some religious conservatives grumbled at these reforms, women's participation in mosques and religious life has a long tradition in Morocco, and the new *mourchidats* are now integrated into the national culture. End Summary.

Women, Islam and Reform

¶2. (SBU) King Mohammed VI has called the advancement of women's rights "the cornerstone" of Morocco's strategy of building a modern democratic society. Following the Casablanca terrorist attacks of 2003, and hints of religious radicalization among Moroccans at home and abroad, the King initiated a series of reforms designed to restructure and revitalize religious thought and instruction in Morocco. One significant innovation among the King's reforms involved creating a more prominent role for women as religious leaders.

Mourchidats: "Equal to Male Imams"

¶3. (SBU) As Commander of the Faithful, i.e., the Supreme religious leader for the Moroccan Malachite branch of Sunni Islam, a role that also encompasses a responsibility for Jews and even Christians, the King began a program to train and appoint women as *mourchidats* or spiritual guides. When the initiative was announced in 2005, protests by religious conservatives prompted the Palace to clarify that the duties of a *mourchidat* would differ from those of imams in that they would not be allowed to lead prayers. Aside from this difference, however, the government has since taken great pains to develop a framework under which women spiritual leaders have a status equal to their male counterparts.

¶4. (C) Mohammed Amine Echouaibi, Regional Delegate of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, who oversees the *mourchidat* training program, told PolOff that the GOM views *mourchidats* as equal to male imams. He noted that both

groups undergo the same training, are held to the same rigorous standards, and receive the same salary for their work (at least 800 MAD or the equivalent of USD 100 per month). While only imams can lead prayers, Morocco's 200 mourchidats may deliver and monitor sermons in the mosques over which they preside, organize activities centered around the mosque, and conduct counseling sessions. Although women make up the majority of those seeking their guidance, mourchidats are encouraged to provide counsel to men as well.

The mourchidats use these counseling sessions to address spiritual concerns, as well as to educate women about their legal rights under the new Family Code (Moudawana).

15. (SBU) Outside of the mosque, mourchidats minister in areas where radical teachings may find a receptive audience and seek to promote openness and modernity within society. Four mourchidats and six imams, for example, visit Morocco's Sale prison every week to organize religious activities and discussions, and to encourage moderate religious thought. Sale prison is one of the principal detention centers for Islamic extremists. They also organize debates and conferences at universities geared toward populations they feel are susceptible to extremist teachings.

Becoming a Mourchidat

16. (SBU) Samira, a married mother of two, fits the average profile of a mourchidat. She is in her 30s, and holds both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. While a Master's degree is compulsory for the program, it can be in any subject.

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(Samira's is in poetry). After being selected out of more than 800 applicants, she and 50 other women spent a full year in training, taking courses in religion, humanities, women's rights, science, and international relations for eight hours a day. She was educated side-by-side with her male counterparts who went on to become imams.

17. (SBU) Asked to describe a typical day as a mourchidat, Samira said, "Nothing is ever typical. Some days I am a psychiatrist, other days a counselor, social worker, lawyer or doctor." She noted that her mandate has recently expanded to include AIDS education, information on women's legal rights, and divorce counseling, and said that her greatest challenge is to provide advice in a non-judgmental way. She struggles to balance work and family commitments and says that her parents encouraged her to pursue a less religious, more scholarly profession. "But what I have chosen is more than a profession, it is a mission," she emphasized.

Reviving the Prominent Role of Women

19. (SBU) According to the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, the number of women attending mosques has risen in recent years, and the program was partly a response to this emerging need. Women have historically served as teachers in Moroccan mosques. One contact noted that her great-great-grandmother served for years as a teacher in a mosque, and argued that the Palace is rightly trying to revive the prominent role of women in Islam. Echouaibi emphasized that although women have previously ministered in mosques, this is the first time their activities have been institutionalized, and compensated.

Using Gender to Counter Radicalization

19. (C) Although the Government plans to expand the mourchidat program because of high demand, not all welcome the changes. Abdelaziz Taleb, Chief of Staff to Morocco's

Secretary General of the Government said that, not surprisingly, religious fundamentalists had provided the most opposition to gender-related reforms, including those encouraging a more prominent role for women in religion. While he acknowledged that rapid change could provoke a backlash among more traditional elements, Taleb emphasized the need to push ahead anyway. "We are inundated with broadcasted sermons encouraging us to be increasingly more conservative, which often means that women should be less visible and have fewer rights," he stated. Without the full participation of women, Morocco's gradual movement toward democracy would fail, he asserted.

¶10. (C) The Palace believes that promoting the rights of women in all spheres fundamentally undermines the objectives and ammunition of religious zealots who seek to restrict women's empowerment, and other reforms initiated by the Palace, Taleb said. By challenging parochial ideas of gender, the Palace is effectively challenging the legitimacy of other radical doctrines as well, Raja Naji El Makkaoui, Professor in Islamic Studies at Mohammed V University, explained. Echouaibi of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs agreed, calling the mourchidats "a counterweight" to extremist tendencies that help the population stay faithful to Morocco's history of tolerance by refuting recently imported foreign interpretations of Islam.

¶11. (C) Many Muslim countries also voiced opposition to the King's religious reforms, viewing them as a radical departure from Islamic practice, Abderahim Rahhly, the new Chief of the Americas Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, told us. Most complained that Morocco's actions created pressure on them to take similar actions, he explained, underlining the GOM's pioneering role in the region and among Muslim countries in gender-based reforms.

More Leadership Roles for Women

¶12. (SBU) In addition to the mourchidat program, the King has institutionalized the practice of women delivering religious discourses in mosques and in his daily lecture series during the month of Ramadan. Considered an extremely high honor reserved for only the most respective/authoritative teachers of Islam, six Moroccan women have now earned this distinction. While some critics

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have complained that a woman at the pulpit contradicted the Koran, the Palace has argued that rather than introducing a new doctrine, it was simply applying correct Koranic teachings, noting that the Prophet Mohammed accorded his wife Aisha a similar honor.

¶13. (C) Women currently represent one-fourth of the members of Moroccan High Council of Ulema, the religious body overseeing doctrine and Islamic teachings, according to the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. They also constitute one-fourth of the Council of Ulema charged with ministering to Moroccans residing abroad (mostly in Europe), a group of particular concern to the GOM given the involvement of Moroccan expatriates in the 2004 Madrid train bombings. At least one woman also serves on each of the 16 regional Councils of Ulema. In short, through women, the Palace has created a force to promote and institutionalize moderate Islam.

Comment

¶14. (C) The public acceptance of the mourchidat program demonstrates again how Morocco is a leader in societal and religious reform in the Muslim world. While Morocco,s 200 mourchidats are few in number compared to Morocco,s 45,722

imams and 1,600 other recognized preachers, their influence is growing. They represent another important part of the GOM,s ongoing efforts to promote religious moderation and tolerance. One factor which may have eased its acceptance is the relatively strong role of women in Berber society. As a result, this reform may not be so easily replicated elsewhere, but it does feed into the growing phenomenon of Islamo-feminism. This innovation, although fully aligned with our own goals of promoting moderation, modernization and reforms, was an independent initiative conceived, debated, and implemented by Moroccan authorities. The success of the mourchidats emphasizes how, despite some flaws documented by our human rights and religious freedom reporting, Morocco remains committed to extending full rights and participation to women. End Comment.

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